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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Air Force attempts to minimize racial and sexual discrimination by incorporating federal laws into its infrastructure and by exercising consistent enforcement of these laws. This leads to a development of cross-cultural communication among various subcultures within a multi-ethnic environment. The Social Actions Office at each Air Force base offers required orientation sessions on discrimination and standards. This office was established in 1973, under Regulation 30-2, as a result of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial disturbances at military bases, and statistics which indicated that blacks received harsher military punishments than whites. Regulation 30-2 and others outline specific discriminatory behavior and state proper standards of military conduct. Orientation sessions emphasize the reasons discrimination exists, the need for communication, and how individual perceptions influence interracial, interpersonal, and intercultural communications. The U.S. Air Force stresses that arbitrary discrimination negatively affects its mission and image. It also teaches understanding and appreciation of individual characteristics and cultural differences. (JHP)

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ENHANCEMENT OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION WITHIN A MULTI-ETHNIC ENVIRONMENT: THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE OFFICE OF SOCIAL ACTIONS

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As a form of introduction, I should clarify my background is in cross-cultural communication. I am aware of ethnic and minority studies perspectives, but my academic training is not in these areas. Thus, this paper will emphasize the enhancement of cross-cultural communication among ethnic and minority groups as exemplified through the U.S. Air Force Office of Social Actions.

I am currently a Captain in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and have also served as an active duty officer. Based on these military experiences, I have observed approaches practiced by the Air Force to minimize racial and sexual discrimination. Basically, they have done this by incorporating federal laws into the Air Force infrastructure and exercising consistent enforcement of these policies. In this manner they are enhancing cross-cultural communication among various subcultures within the American culture.

My observations of this process have impressed me. By implementing and enforcing such policies, the Air Force minimizes racial and sexual discrimination. An individual can only be promoted by excelling according to the rules of the organization. Policies which prohibit racial and sexual discrimination are included within the rules.

This report is based on the Office of Social Actions orientation session which newcomers at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base are required to participate in. All Air Force bases have similar orientation sessions which are presented by the Social Actions office at each base.

The beginnings of the Office of Social Actions can be traced to the

Civil Rights Act of 1964. This Act forbids racial discrimination in the use of publicly owned or operated facilities and in places of public accomodation. It prohibits voting registrars from applying different standards. It also forbids discrimination in employment, union membership, and federally aided programs.

By the early 1970's, other indicators exemplified the need for such an office. Racial disturbances occurred at a number of military installations in a variety of geographical areas. The disturbances were perceived as growing from a lack of sensitivity, indifferent leadership, irresponsiveness on the part of supervisors, and lack of communication channels.

In more specific areas, administrative punishments (Article 15's, etc.) were perceived as being inequitable. This perception was later substantiated statistically. For similar offenses, whites were more likely than blacks to receive counseling than punishment (on a scale of three to one). Also, blacks served longer pre-trial confinements than whites for the same offenses.

Government response to racial and sexual discrimination was felt in many areas of military employment. The Department of Defense (DOD) Human Goals Proclamation resulted in DOD Directive 1100.15 (The Equal Opportunity Employment Program) and DOD Directive 1322.11 (Education and Training in Human/Race Relations for Military Personnel). Civilians were also affected with the formation of Executive Order 11478, which is a presidential order establishing the inclusion of civilians in Equal Opportunity and Treatment (EOT) and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) directives.

In 1973, the Air Force established Social Actions as a career field. Air Force Regulation (AFR) 30-2 is the primary regulation which

describes the career field and its objectives. AFR 30-1 clarifies Air Force Standards in this area. For instance, standards of conduct require each Air Force member to treat others with respect and dignity.

AFR 30-2 outlines a variety of specific directives which are commensurate with AFR 30-1. The following list highlights representative areas of concern:

1) It is Air Force policy to conduct its affairs free of arbitrary discrimination . . . and to provide for equal opportunity for all members . . . . Commanders musttake the appropriate administrative or judicial action to eliminate or neutralize discrimination and its effects.

2) Examples of unacceptable behavior are clarified. Such clarification describes that racist and sexist language, racial and ethnic humor, harassment, intimidation, and fighting are activities which violate Air Force policy.

3) Air Force members are also instructed to use a persons title or proper name (such as Mr., Ms., Sgt., or Capt.). First names may be used if okayed by the individual.

AFR 39-6 states that NCO's (non-commissioned officers) must actively support the Air Force human resources development programs as outlined in AFR 30-2.

Military members are all subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (U.C.M.J.). The U.C.M.J. clearly states that violations of Air Force standards, in the form of verbal and nonverbal behavior or other actions, constitute violations of, and are punishable under, the U.C.M.J.

As previously stated, all newcomers to the Air Force are required

to participate in a Social Actions orientation session which emphasizes the aforementioned areas. This orientation session not only describes Air Force response to racial and sexual discrimination, it also describes how and why such discrimination exists and why it cannot be tolerated. Communication processes are stressed within this description. A primary premise is that individual perceptions influence interracial, interpersonal, and intercultural communication.

Communication is defined as "transmission of information, ideas, attitudes, or emotions from one person to another, by conveying those ideas through written or spoken symbols or other verbal or nonverbal signs". Perceptions and misperceptions are an important part of this process as intended messages are not always received messages. Perceptions are defined as "information which is based on inputs from our senses and from interpretation of this data based on past and present experiences". Verbal and nonverbal symbols influence interracial, interpersonal, and intercultural communication in negative and positive ways. Some of the negative effects include racist language and excluding behavior. Prejudice often exemplifies itself within these negative effects.

Prejudice is described as having three bases: 1) historical -- when immigrants bring "old world" prejudices with them, 2) situational -- when our environment teaches us prejudice (usually due to lack of contact), and 3) character structure -- individual attitudes (i.e. the less tolerant the individual the more likely prejudice will evolve or situations where individuals with frustrations have a need for a scapegoat).

The Air Force explicitly stresses that arbitrary discrimination

negatively impacts on the mission and image of the Air Force. Arbitrary discrimination is broken down into six components: 1) any action, 2) unlawful or unjust, 3) which results in unequal treatment, 4) is based on age, color, national origin, race, ethnic group, religion or sex (and handicap for civilians), 5) where distinctions are not supported by legal or rational considerations, and 6) including disparaging terms or remarks (such as racist language).

Such discrimination negatively affects the individual and the mission of the Air Force in a variety of ways. For instance, an aircraft maintenance technician, who is distracted or frustrated by discrimination, may not do his/her job completely or correctly resulting in an aircraft failure. Similar cases of sabotage have occurred in a variety of situations. There are many implications for this type of behavior throughout the Air Force.

The Air Force image is also important as a poor image leads to weak public confidence in the ability and functioning of the Air Force. Thus, enforcement of Social Actions principles carries over to the local/off-base community as well. Businesses and organizations which violate EOT/EEO standards are placed off-limits to military personnel. The Secretary of Defense, for example, has banned members of the U.S. armed forces from active membership in racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi groups.

The recognition of differences, according to the Social Actions position, is fine. It's what we do with the recognition that determines the goodness or badness. A "Salad Bowl" approach is emphasized whereby we acknowledge individual characteristics and have an appreciation for cultural differences. Like a salad you have a mixture of many things, each different, but adding to the flavor of the entire salad.

Air Force members are encouraged to recognize when standards are not met and to communicate policies to those who are in violation of Air Force standards. Members may seek to correct such violations by referring to the chain of command, legal office, inspector general, chaplain, or social actions office. Civilian employees also have an EEO representative. Corrective actions for violations include verbal/written counseling, letter of reprimand, UIF/Control Roster, Article 15, APR/OER comments, removal from supervisory position, separation from the service, or court-martial.

It cannot be assumed that the aforementioned Social Actions regulations will completely stop racial and sexual discrimination. But, their enforcement can clearly be interpreted as a thorough benefit to cross-cultural communication within a multi-ethnic environment such as the U.S. Air Force.

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